

Church membership identifies people as followers of Jesus Christ and as those who belong to the historic and worldwide community known as the Christian Church. When people become members of a local church of the United Church of Christ they become at the same moment members of the United Church of Christ and the Church Universal.

## History and Background

Following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the people who had been closely related to him during his earthly ministry--the disciples and a number of other followers--began to meet together. At Pentecost these people began to preach publicly about the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and to invite others to join them in the worship of God and the proclamation of the gospel.

Small communities of believers began to form, meeting together in homes for worship, fellowship and sharing in the sacramental meal of communion. People who responded to the preaching of the gospel and wanted to join those of "the Way" denounced their old way of life and submitted to baptism as the rite of initiation into the new age of the reign of God and into the church, the community living in anticipation and hope of the reign.

These early communities of Christians felt compelled to share the

good news of what had happened in their lives. People from these communities began to travel as missionaries of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul is the earliest and best known of these missionaries who gathered new communities of believers around the Mediterranean.

## A Theological Understanding of Membership

It is typical in American culture for people to join and hold membership in all sorts of groups and organizations. The meaning of church membership is often compared to other kinds of membership and thus is misunderstood. Christian belief about membership is unique.

- Christians believe that God calls people to be Christians, and members of the Christian Church. Membership is a response to the initiative taken by God in a person's life. "Membership in the body of Christ and in any given community of believers is voluntary in the sense that faith, as response to God's initiative, is a free act, and in the sense that membership is developed by willing participation in the church's ministry and witness."
- Membership in the Christian Church implies much more than membership in a specific organization or congregation. Membership in "God's people" is part of membership in a specific

local church. A new church member also joins with all who belong and have ever belonged to the church all over the world.

- Membership in the Christian Church is more than membership in a human organization. Christians believe membership is not only in the community known as the church but also in the body of Christ. Paul developed the powerful image of the church as the body of Christ. In its most fundamental understanding, the church is the ongoing physical presence of Christ in the world, indeed, Christ's very body. Paul wrote, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). The implications are astounding. While God is not restricted to working through the church, the church is a major vehicle available to God for God's mission in the world.
- Membership creates a covenant between the church member and God and between that person and other members of the church. People who enter this covenant relationship promise loyalty and trust in one another. Commitment to this covenant empowers people to infuse life in the church with a quality not typically found in human organizations--appreciation and honoring of differences and diversity. Most human organizations survive and prosper because they bring together people who are alike. But the Christian

Church, through its sense of covenant, preserves congregational life. It holds members together even when severe struggles over diversity of actions and beliefs occur. The Christian Church makes no distinctions of race, sex, age, tongue, nationality or economic status. It seeks to anticipate, and to be the first sign of, how all people will dwell together in unity in the coming reign of God.

## Common Practices

People become members of a local church of the United Church of Christ in one of three ways:

- By baptism and either confirmation or profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the United Church of Christ infant baptism is commonly practiced and symbolizes the church's belief that God loves the child and is at work in the child's life. Parents and sponsors promise to see that the child experiences life in the church and to insure that the child has an opportunity when older to receive instruction in the Christian faith and through confirmation to make his or her own decision to be a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of the church. The culmination of confirmation is the acknowledgment by the person that God has called her or him to be a Christian and member of the church, and the same acknowledgment by the congregation and their acceptance of the person into

membership. There is usually a span of 12 to 14 years between an infant's baptism and the formal welcome into membership in the church at confirmation. The United Church of Christ also practices adult baptism. For the person not baptized as an infant, baptism and membership occur simultaneously. That person, having felt the call of God to be a Christian and church member and having undergone instruction in the meaning of church membership, professes his or her faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in the baptism and is received into membership.

- By reaffirmation of faith. Membership in a local church carries with it certain responsibilities. For a variety of reasons, there are occasions when people are unable or choose not to fulfill their membership responsibilities. Often these result in people being dropped from the membership rolls of a local church. Later many of these people seek to renew their membership. The church receives these people upon a reaffirmation or re-profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- By letter of transfer or certification from other Christian churches. Membership in the Church Universal is always made real and concrete through membership in a specific local church. When members move or

seek to change the place of their local church membership, they transfer membership. The usual procedure is for the church where membership has been held to send a letter to the church where the person plans to affiliate certifying that the person is a member in good standing and releasing that person for membership in the new congregation.

Within the United Church of Christ there are no denomination-wide membership standards or requirements. Each local church adopts its own membership requirements. Often these include all or a combination of specified attendance at worship, partaking of the sacrament of Holy Communion, financial support and participation in the activities of the congregation. Here's a sample of how membership could be described:

Membership in this church shall be open to any person who has been baptized and has been confirmed, or who has made public confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In accordance with the gospel covenant which binds into a unity "faithful people of all ages, tongues and races," membership is open to all without regard to race, color, culture or sexual orientation. Members shall pledge themselves to attend the regular worship of the church and the celebration of Holy Communion; to live the Christian life; to share

in the life and work of the church; to contribute to its support, its mission and benevolences; and to seek diligently the spiritual welfare of the membership and the community.

## Responsibilities of Membership

Joining the Christian Church brings responsibilities that include:

- Being a minister. A basic tenet of Protestant Christianity is "the priesthood of all believers." Every member of the church takes on the mission of the church individually and in community with other members. As Martin Luther said, every Christian is to be a "little Christ" to the world. The ministry and mission of Jesus Christ become the ministry and mission of every believer and church member. A life of service to people and the whole of the creation is a membership commitment.

Members of Christ's body bear witness, in action and speech, to God's presence in the world. This mission they carry out by the way in which they participate not only in affairs connected with their family and their job but also in those of the community at large: politics, education, leisure and art. By personal acts of service and sometimes resistance, which aim to actualize God's justice, mercy and peace, and by

active work to alter structures which deny God's will for humanity, they participate in the life of Christ. (COCU, 1985, p.25)

- Regularly being part of the worshipping community. Sustenance for the life of faith is derived from participation with the congregation when it gathers regularly for worship and the sacraments. Also, a life of prayer and meditation is expected. They further participate in its life through study of Scripture and earnest thought concerning God's will for the world and the Church, and through the generous support of its life and mission by gifts, by work, and by active devotion. (COCU, 1985, p.25)
- Being a steward. A steward is a person put in charge of that which belongs to another. Christians believe that everything people have--life, gifts or talents, time, ability to earn money, possessions--are gifts from God. They are given in trust, given with the responsibility to manage them wisely and to offer them faithfully. The offering of money and the investment of time and abilities to the church and its mission are vital acts of membership and signs of faithfulness to the covenant.
- Being a learner. Commitment is an act of the mind as well as of

the heart. Faithfulness and service increase in quality and capacity through a disciplined program of study and learning. A Christian's growth and maturity occur through a regular encounter with the Bible and through a wide-ranging engagement with other church members in study and discussion.

## Resources on Membership

For further reading on church membership, look at:

- **The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting**, Chapter IV, "Membership," 1985. Order from Consultation on Church Union, Research Park, 151 Wall Street, Princeton, NJ 08540.
- Resources, news and discussion on [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) and/or in the **United Church News**.

## Issues Facing Your Church

- Theologically the church believes more about membership than seems to be the reality. While claiming to be a unique community of people among all human organizations, the church seems to be no different from these other organizations. Is the church a unique human community in your experience? How is this uniqueness experienced by members? How is it communicated to and observed by the world?

- There are no standard membership requirements in the United Church of Christ. Some feel that membership requirements should be quite stringent. Others feel very broad and relaxed requirements represent God's welcome and openness. For them, to make membership requirements stringent would exclude people from God's love and acceptance. How does your church understand this issue and deal with it?
- Practices of preparing people for membership vary widely within the United Church of Christ. Some young people go through an intensive two-year confirmation program in preparation for membership, while others have only a brief orientation period. Some churches offer prospective member classes, while others invite people to membership upon their desire to join without any preparation. What should be part of a minimal program of preparation for people who are to become members?
- Many churches give considerable attention to getting people to make a commitment to membership but do little about ongoing nurture and growth in Christian faith for members. How effective is your church's program for nurturing members? How could it be strengthened?

## Questions

- In your church which of the three ways of joining a church is most prominent? What does your church do to make membership by this means significant to the new members and the congregation?
- How does your church make it clear that membership in it is also membership in the United Church of Christ and in the Church Universal?

<sup>1</sup>Consultation on Church Union, **The COCU Consensus: In Quest of a Church of Christ Uniting** (Princeton, NJ, 1985), p.23.